

Schools, parishes focus on prevention, detection to keep safe

The Feb. 14 shooting deaths of 17 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., revived the topic of campus safety.

That is not a new concern for Tom Alban, who for 12 years has served the Archdiocese of Baltimore as director of risk management.

His frame of reference ranges from the April 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado that took 13 lives, to the 26 murdered by a gunman last November at First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, to the March 20 incident at Great Mills High School in St. Mary's County that ended with two injured and the assailant dead, all three being students.

"Initially it was school safety and security," Alban said. "Now it's starting to branch out into parish safety and security. We need our parishes and schools to look at this as a cultural shift."

Active assailants are just one item on Alban's list of potential risks, which includes chemical spills, fires, medical emergencies and extreme weather, as Alban's office received 52 damage claims from the high winds that wreaked havoc the first weekend in March.

"We're really advocating for what we call an all-risk response," Alban said.

Schools

School of the Incarnation in Gambrills applies a comprehensive approach. Visitors must check in with the receptionist, who runs their photo ID through a screening software that scans custody orders and state and national sex offender lists (see photo above). If any red flags are found, the school's team of first responders is instantly notified.

Faculty and staff use the system to check in and out of the building. With student

attendance monitored through an electronic database, a current list of who is in the building at any given time is available.

“Student safety is our utmost priority,” said principal Lisa Shipley, who allows a local SWAT team to drill in its building. “It’s important for children and parents to feel that they’re safe so that the best learning environment can exist.”

After the Parkland, Fla., shooting, the archdiocesan Department of Education sent a letter to parents which detailed the emphasis on creating a vigilant culture, as well as plans to enact a systemwide review of all safety procedures and to work with the Maryland Center for School Safety in the area of emergency preparedness.

“The security of our schools is of the utmost importance and requires the participation and support of the entire school community – students, faculty, staff and parents,” said James B. Sellinger, chancellor of education. “We must continue to work together to create a school environment where all know, understand and live by a culture of ‘see something, know something, say something.’ ”

Many Catholic schools do not have the funding of public schools, some of which employ armed guards. Small class sizes and tight-knit communities, however, can encourage the recognition of potential problems.

“Let’s create an environment where the administration, the staff, the faculty are engaged in knowing their students, monitoring changes in behavior, those type of things that would lead one to be concerned that something’s going on with the child,” Alban said.

Best practices include monitoring the mental health of students; a consistent system for visitor control; a single point of entry before visitors have access to the rest of the school; and lock down between arrival and dismissal.

Threats will always exist. Alban encourages schools to create a relationship with first responders, and said that in some instances, if a school is faced with a situation that calls for a response, its system has already failed.

Alban said that nearly all risks can be addressed by one of three responses: lockdown (i.e., assailant); evacuate (fire); shelter in place (tornado, chemical spill).

Parishes

The same goals and protocols apply to parishes. While many have formed safety committees to explore the issue, St. Michael in Poplar Springs is well beyond the planning stage.

Donna Binney, its business manager, realized the necessity of emergency planning more than two years ago, during a thunderstorm.

St. Michael's, which sits in Mount Airy and draws parishioners from four counties, enlisted those with experience in law enforcement and related fields.

"The Holy Spirit, when the time is right, sends the people," Binney said.

A former member of the Secret Service drafted an emergency response plan. Al Cerrone, a retired government employee, edited it. It is updated annually by the parish's Security Ministry, which balances security with remaining warm and welcoming.

"A church is different from a business," Cerrone said. "Its mission - the church - is for people."

Designing an emergency plan came in phases. Issues were addressed in order of likelihood, beginning with medical emergencies, followed by fire and severe weather, and then assailant.

"When you're trying to do something complex that you don't know how to do, you have to take it in small chunks," Binney said. "The more you understand what you can do and what your options are in any situation, the more lives you can save."

During two emergency drills for religious education classes - for fire and severe weather - St. Michael's Security Ministry identified a weakness: communication. Without a PA system, it's difficult to contact mobile catechists. Walkie-talkies fill that hole.

Religious education is held in space that will double as a pre-school next fall. Each classroom has an emergency kit, hanging in a drawstring backpack behind the door.

Some contain a first-aid kit. All include a reflective vest; glow sticks for students' wrists; water and a cloth; a flashlight; a whistle; emergency procedures; and cell phone numbers of fellow catechists.

Security Ministry was St. Michael's ministry of the month last November, when members briefed parishioners about safety procedures. Binney shares the St. Michael's model with other parishes, but emphasizes the necessity for individualized plans.

At the archdiocesan level, Alban, who notes that security around religious education is as vital as school safety, encourages every parish to bring together parishioners with expertise, as well as staff members and volunteers.

Parishes should evaluate their campus, including checking locks for efficiency and fixing landscaping that might conceal an attacker. Operational procedures should also be reviewed. Parishes should inform their communities on appropriate responses to emergencies, including knowing whom to alert. Long-term responses range from trauma counseling to where Mass will be held in the event of damage to a worship space.

Most important, Alban said, is for all – from parishioners to pastors to educators and students – to be observant at all times, to remain aware of their surroundings and situation, and to keep others apprised.

Email Emily Rosenthal at erosenthal@CatholicReview.org